THE MAIDS OF PARADISE

By

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PART ONE.

CHAPTER I.

At the Telegraph.

On the third day of August, 1870, I left Paris in search of John Buckhurst.

On the 4th of August I lost all traces of Mr. Buckhurst near the frontier, in the village of Morsbronn. On August 5th, about eight o'clock in the morning, the military telegraph instrument in the operator's room over the temporary barracks of the Third Hussars clicked out the call for urgency, not the usual military signal, but a secret sequence understood only by certain officers of the Imperial Military Police. The operator on duty therefore stepped into my room and waited while I took his place at the wire.

"Who is this?" came over the wire in the secret code; and I answered at once: "Inspector of Foreign Division, Imperial Military Police, on duty at Morsbronn, Alsace."

After considerable delay the next message arrived in the Morse code: "Is that you, Scarlett?"

And I replied: "Yes. Who are you? Why do you not use the code? Repeat the code signal and your number."

The signal was repeated, then came the message: "This is the Tuileries. You have my authority to use the Morse code for the sake of brevity. Do you understand? I am Jarras. The Empress is here." Instantly reassured by the message from Colonel Jarras, head of the bureau to which I was attached, I answered that I understood. Then the telegrams began to fly, all in the Morse code:

Jarras—"Have you caught Buckhurst?"

I—"No."

Jarras—"How did he get away?"

I—"There's confusion enough on the frontier to cover the escape of a hundred thieves."

There was a long pause; I lighted a cigar and waited. After a while the instrument began again.

Jarras—"The Empress desires to know where the chateau called La Trappe is."

I—"La Trappe is about four kilometres from Morsbronn, near the hamlet of Trois-Feuilles."

Jarras—"It is understood that Madame de Vassart's group of socialists are about to leave La Trappe for Paradise, in Morbihan. It is possible that Buckhurst has taken refuge among them. Therefore you will proceed to La Trappe. Do you understand?"

I—"Perfectly."

Jarras—"If Buckhurst is found you will bring him to Paris at once. Shoot him if he resists arrest. If the community at La Trappe has not been warned of a possible visit from us, you will find and arrest the following individuals: Claude Tavernier, late professor of law, Paris School of Law; Achille Bazard, ex-instructor in mathematics, Fontainebleau Artillery School; Dr. Leo Delmont, ex-interne, Charity Hospital, Paris; Mlle. Sylvia Elven, lately of the Odeon; the Countess de Vassart, well known for her eccentricities.

"You will affix the government seals to the house as usual; you will then escort the people named to the nearest point on the Belgian frontier. The Countess de Vassart usually dresses like a common peasant. Look out that she does not slip through your fingers. Repeat your instructions." I repeated them from my memoranda.

There was a pause, then click! click! the instrument gave the code signal

"Look Out That She Does Not Slip Through Your Fingers."

that the matter was ended, and I repeated the signal, opened my code-book, and began to translate the instructions into cipher for safety's sake.

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Where the Vosges mountains towered in obscurity a curtain of rain joined earth and sky. The rivers ran yellow, brimful, foaming at the fords. Somewhere in that spectral forest Prussian cavalry were hidden, watching the heights where our drenched divisions lay. Behind that forest a German army was massing, fresh from the combat in the north, where the tragedy of Wissembourg had been enacted only the day before, in the presence of the entire French army—the awful spectacle of a single division of seven thousand men suddenly enveloped and crushed by seventy thousand Germans.

The rain fell steadily but less heavily. I changed my civilian clothes for a hussar uniform, sent a trooper to find me a horse, and sat down by the window to stare at the downpour and think how best I might carry out my instructions to a successful finish.

The colony at La Trappe was, as far as I could judge, a product of conditions which had, a hundred years before, culminated in the French Revolution. Now, in 1870, but under different circumstances, all France was once more disintegrating socially. Opposition to the Empire, to the dynasty, to the government, had been seething for years; now the separate crystals which formed on the edges of the boiling undercurrents began to grow into masses which, adhering to other masses, interfered with the healthy functions of national life. First among these came the International Society of Workingmen, with all its affiliations—the "Internationale," as it was called. In its wake trailed minor societies, some mild and harmless, some dangerous and secret, some violent, advocating openly the destruction of all existing conditions.

With one exception, all those whom the police and the government regarded as inclined to violence left the group. There remained, with this one exception, a nucleus of earnest, thoughtful people whose creed was in part the creed of the Internationale, the creed of universal brotherhood, equality before the law, purity of individual living as an example and an incentive to a national purity.

To this inoffensive group came one day a young widow, the Countess de Vassart, placing at their disposal her great wealth, asking only to be received among them as a comrade.

Her history, as known to the police, was peculiar and rather sad: at sixteen she had been betrothed to an elderly, bull-necked colonel of cavalry, the notorious Count de Vassart, who needed what money she might bring him to maintain his reputation as the most brilliantly dissolute old rake in Paris.

Her dossier—for, alas! the young girl already had a dossier—was interesting, particularly in its summing up of her personal character:

"To the naive ignorance of a convent pensionnaire, she adds an innocence of mind, a purity of conduct, and a credulity which render her an easy prey to the adroit, who play upon her sympathies. She is dangerous only as a source of revenue for dangerous men."

It was from her salon that young Victor Noir went to his death at Auteuil on the 10th of January; and possibly the shock of the murder and the almost universal conviction that justice under the Empire was hopeless drove the young Countess to seek a refuge in the country where, at her house of La Trappe, she could quietly devote her life to helping the desperately wretched, and where she could in security, hold counsel with those who had chosen to give their lives to the noblest of all works—charity and the propaganda of universal brotherhood.

And here, at La Trappe, the young aristocrat first donned the robe of democracy, dedicated her life and fortune to the cause, and worked with her own delicate hands, for every morsel of bread that passed her lips.

But the simple life at La Trappe, the negative protest against the Empire and all existing social conditions, the purity of motive, the serene and inspired self-abnegation, could not save the colony at La Trappe nor the young chatelaine from the claws of those who prey upon the innocence of the generous.

And so came to this ideal community one John Buckhurst, a stranger, quiet, suave, deadly pale, a finely molded man, with delicately fashioned hands and feet, and two eyes so colorless that in some lights they appeared to be almost sightless.

In a month from that time he was the power that moved that community even in its most insignificant machinery. With marvelous skill he constructed out of that simple republic of protestants an absolute despotism. And he was the despot.

An intimation from the Tuileries interrupted a meeting of the council at the house in Paradise; an arrest was threatened—that of Professor Reclus—and the indignant young Countess was requested to retire to her chateau of La Trappe. She obeyed, but invited her guests to accompany her. Among those who accepted was Buckhurst.

About this time the government began to take a serious interest in John Buckhurst. On the secret staff of the Imperial Military Police were always certain foreigners—among others, myself and a young man named James Speed; and Colonel Jarras had already decided to employ us in watching Buckhurst, when war came on France like a bolt from the blue, giving the men of the Secret Service all they could attend to.

There is no reason why it should not be generally known that the crown jewels of France were menaced from the very first by a conspiracy so alarming and apparently so irresistible that the Emperor himself believed, even in the beginning of the fatal campaign, that it might be necessary to send the crown jewels of France to the Bank of England for safety.

On the 19th of July, the day that war was declared, certain of the crown jewels, kept temporarily at the palace of the Tuileries, were sent under heavy guards to the Bank of France. Every precaution was taken; yet the great diamond crucifix of Louis XI. was missing when the guard under Captain Siebert turned over the treasures to the governor of the Bank of France.

Instantly absolute secrecy was ordered, so the news of the robbery never became public property, but from one end of France to the other the gendarmerie, the police, local, municipal, and secret, were stirred up to activity.

Within forty-eight hours, an individual answering Buckhurst's description had sold a single enormous diamond for two hundred and fifty thousand francs to a dealer in Strasbourg, a Jew named Fishel Cohen. An hour after he had recorded the transaction at the Strasbourg Diamond Exchange he and the diamond were on their way to Paris, in charge of a detective. A few hours later the stone was identified at the Tuileries as having been taken from the famous crucifix of Louis XI.

From Fishel Cohen's agonized description of the man who had sold him the diamond, Colonel Jarras believed he recognized John Buckhurst. But how on earth Buckhurst had obtained access to the jewels, or how he had managed to spirit away the cross from the very center of the Tuileries, could only be explained through the theory of accomplices among the trusted intimates of the imperial entourage. And if there existed such a conspiracy, who was involved?

My chase after Buckhurst began as soon as Colonel Jarras could summon me; and as Buckhurst had last been heard of in Strasbourg, I went after

"Across the Meadow," Said the Young Girl.

him on a train loaded with red-legged, uproarious soldiers.

I tracked Buckhurst to Morsbronn, where I lost all traces of him; and now here I was with my orders concerning the unfortunate people at La Trappe, staring out at the dismal weather and wondering where my wild-goose chase would end.

Half an hour later I rode out of Morsbronn, clad in the uniform of the Third Hussars, a disguise supposed to convey the idea to those at La Trappe that the army and not the police were responsible for their expulsion.

A moist, fern-bordered wood road attracted me; I reasoned that it must lead, by a short cut, across the hills to the military highway which passed between Trois-Feuilles and La Trappe. So I took it, and presently came into four cross-roads unknown to me.

This grassy carrefour was occupied by a flock of turkeys, busily engaged in catching grasshoppers; their keeper, a prettily shaped peasant girl, looked up at me as I drew bridle, then quietly resumed the book she had been reading.

"My child," said I, "will you kindly direct me, with appropriate gestures, to the military highway which passes the Chateau de la Trappe?"

CHAPTER II.

The Government Interferes.

"There is a short cut across that meadow," said the young girl, raising a rounded, sun-tinted arm, bare to the shoulder. "And, after that, you will come to a thicket of white birches."

"Thank you, mademoiselle."

"And after that," she said, idly following with her blue eyes the contour of her own lovely arm, "you must turn to the left, and there you will cross a hill. You can see it from where we stand—"

A deadened report shook the summer air—the sound of a cannon fired very far away, perhaps on the citadel of Strasbourg. Without turning my head I said: "It is difficult to believe that there is war anywhere in the world—is it not, mademoiselle?"

"Not if one knows the world," she said, indifferently.

"Do you know it, my child?"

"Sufficiently," she said.

She had opened again the book which she had been reading when I first noticed her. From my saddle I saw that it was Moliere.

"Why do you tend turkeys?" I asked.

"Because it pleases me," she replied, raising her eyebrows in faint displeasure.

"For that same reason you read Monsieur Moliere?" I suggested.

"Doubtless, monsieur."

"Are you what you pretend to be, an Alsatian turkey tender?"

"Parbleu! There are my turkeys, monsieur."

"Perhaps," said I, "but I have asked you a question which remains parried. Who are you?" I demanded.

"Oh, a mere nobody in such learned company," she said, shaking her head with a mock humility that annoyed me intensely.

"Very well," said I, conscious every moment of her pleasure in my discomfiture; "under the circumstances I am going to ask you to accept my escort to La Trappe; for I think you are Mademoiselle Elven, recently of the Odeon theater."

"Monsieur," she said, "do you ride through the world pressing every peasant girl you meet with such ardent entreaties? Truly, your fashion of wooing is not slow, but everybody knows that hussars are headlong gentlemen—'Nothing is sacred from a hussar,'" she hummed, deliberately, in a parody which made me writhe in my saddle.

"Mademoiselle," said I, taking off my forage cap, "your ridicule is not the most disagreeable incident that I expect to meet with today. I am attempting to do my duty, and I must ask you to do yours."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then," said I, amiably, "I shall be obliged to set you on my horse." And I dismounted and went toward her.

After a silence she said, very seriously, "Monsieur, would you dare use violence toward me?"

"Oh, I shall not be very violent," I replied, laughing. I held the opened watch in my hand so that she could see the dial if she chose.

"It is one o'clock," I said, closing the hunting-case with a snap.

She looked me steadily in the eyes.

"Will you come with me to La Trappe?"

She did not stir.

I stepped toward her; she gave me a breathless, defiant stare; then in an instant I caught her up and swung her high into my saddle, before either she or I knew exactly what had happened.

She was clever enough not to try to dismount, woman enough not to make an awkward struggle or do anything ungraceful. In silence, I led the horse forward through the open gate out into the wet meadow.

As for my turkey-girl, she sat stiffly in the saddle, with a firmness and determination that proved her to be a stranger to horses. I scarcely dared look at her, so fearful was I of laughing.

So we went on. The spectacle of a cavalryman in full uniform leading a cavalry horse on which was seated an Alsatian girl in bright peasant costume appeared to astonish the few people we passed.

We met a dozen people in all, I think, some of them peasants, one or two of the better class—a country doctor and a notary among them. "Why do all the people I meet carry bundles?" I demanded of the notary.

"Mon Dieu, monsieur, they are too near the frontier to take risks," he replied.

"You mean to say they are running away from their village of Trois-Feuilles?" I asked.

"Exactly," he said. "War is a rude guest for poor folk."

And so I left him also staring after us, and I had half a mind to go back and examine his portfolio to see what a snipe-faced notary might be carrying about with him.

The lazy road-side butterflies flew up in clouds before the slow-stepping horse; the hill rabbits, rising to their hind-quarters, wrinkled their whiskered noses at us; from every thicket speckled hedge-birds peered at us as we went our way.

At length, as we reached the summit of the sandy hill, "There is La Trappe, monsieur," said my turkey-girl, and once more stretched out her lovely arm.

There was no porter at the gate to welcome me or to warn me back; the wet road lay straight in front, barred only by sunbeams.

"May we enter?" I asked, politely.

She did not answer, and I led my horse down that silent avenue of trees towards the terrace and the glassy pool which mirrored the steps of stone.

"And here we dismount," said I, and offered my aid.

She laid her hands on my shoulders; I swung her to the ground, where her

"Have You Come to Arrest Us?"

sabots clicked and her silver neck-chains jingled in the silence.

"Is that house empty?" I asked, turning brusquely on my companion.

"The Countess de Vassart will give you your answer," she replied.

"Kindly announce me, then," I said, grimly, and together we mounted the broad flight of steps to the esplanade, above which rose the gray mansion of La Trappe.

CHAPTER III.

La Trappe.

There was a small company of people gathered at a table which stood in the cool shadows of the chateau's eastern wing. Towards these people my companion directed her steps; I saw her bend close to the ear of a young girl who had already turned to look at me.

Presently the young girl to whom my companion of the morning had whispered rose gracefully and came toward me.

Slender, yet with that charming outline of body which youth wears as a promise, she moved across the terrace in her flowing robe of crape, and welcomed me with a gesture and a pleasant word, which I scarcely heard, so stupidly I stood, silenced by the absolute loveliness of the girl. Did I say loveliness? No, not that, but something newer, something far more fresh, far sweeter, that made mere physical beauty a thing less vital than the colorless shadow of a crystal.

I stepped forward to meet her, and took off my forage-cap.

"Is it true, monsieur, that you have come to arrest us?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Yes, madame," I replied, already knowing that she was the Countess. She hesitated; then:

"Will you tell me your name? I am Madame de Vassart."

Cap in hand I followed her to the table, where the company had already risen. The young Countess presented me with undisturbed simplicity; I bowed to my turkey-girl, who proved after all, to be the actress from the Odeon, Sylvia Elven; then I solemnly shook hands with Dr. Leo Delmont, Professor Claude Tacernier, and Monsieur Bazard, ex-instructor at the Fontainebleau Artillery School, whom I immediately recognized as the snipe-faced notary I had met on the road.

"Yesterday, Madame la Comtesse," I said, turning to the Countess de Vassart, "the Emperor could easily afford to regard with equanimity the movement in which you are associated. Today that is no longer possible."

The young Countess gave me a bewildered look.

"Is it true," she asked, "that the Emperor does not know we have severed all connection with the Internationale?"

"If that is so," said I, "why does Monsieur Bazard return across the fields to warn you of my coming? And why do you harbor John Buckhurst at La Trappe? Do you not know he is wanted by the police?"

"Monsieur Scarlett," said Mademoiselle Elven, suddenly, "why does the government want John Buckhurst?"

"That, mademoiselle, is the affair of the government and of John Buckhurst," I said.

After a troubled silence the Countess asked me if I would not share their repast, and I thanked her and took some bread and grapes and a glass of red wine.

It made me uncomfortable to play the role I was playing among these misguided but harmless people; that I showed it in my face is certain, for the Countess looked up at me and said, smilingly: "You must not look at us so sorrowfully, Monsieur Scarlett. It is we who pity you."

And I replied, "Madame, you are generous," and took my place among them and ate and drank with them in silence, listening to the breeze in the elms.

I turned to Dr. Delmont.

"With the German armies massing behind the forest borders yonder, it is unsafe for the government to leave you here at La Trappe, doctor. You are too neutral."

"You mean the government fears treason?" demanded the doctor, growing red.

"Yes," I said, "if you insist."

The Countess had turned to me in amazement.

"Treason!" she repeated, in an unsteady voice. "Is it treason for a small community to live quietly here in the Alsatian hills, harming nobody, asking nothing save freedom of thought? Treason! Monsieur, the word has an ugly ring to me. I am a soldier's daughter!"

There was something touchingly illogical in the last words—this young apostle of peace naively displaying her credentials as though the mere word "soldier" covered everything.

"Because I have learned that the boundaries of nations are not the frontiers of human hearts, am I a traitor? Because I know no country but the world, no speech but the universal speech that one reads in a brother's eyes, because I know no barriers, no boundaries, no limits to human brotherhood, am I a traitor?"

The young Countess had risen in her earnestness and had laid one slender, sun-tanned hand upon the table.

"War?" she said. "What is this war to us? The Emperor? What is he to us? We who have set a watch on the world's outer ramparts, guarding the white banner of universal brotherhood! What is this war to us!"

"Do you mean to say that you care nothing for your own birthland?" I demanded, sharply.

"I love the world—all of it—every inch—and if France is part of the world, so is this Prussia that we are teaching our poor peasants to hate."

"Madame," said I, "the women of France today think differently. Our Creator did not make love of country a trite virtue, but a passion, and set it in our bodies along with our other passions. If in you it is absent, that concerns pathology, not the police!"

She had turned a trifle pale; now she sank back into her chair, looking at me with those troubled gray eyes in which Heaven itself had set truth and loyalty.

"Come," said Bazard, in a rage-choked voice, "let it end here, Monsieur Scarlett. If the government sends you here as a spy and an official, pray remember that you are not also sent as a missionary."

My ears began to burn. "That is true," I said, looking at the Countess, whose face had become expressionless, "I ask your pardon for what I have said and . . . for what I am about to do."

There was a silence. Then, in a low voice, I placed them under formal arrest, one by one, touching each lightly on the shoulder as prescribed by the code. And when I came to the Countess, she rose, without embarrassment. I moved my lips and stretched out my arm, barely touching her. She was my prisoner.

"I must ask you to prepare for a journey," I said. "You have your own horses, of course?"

Without answering, Dr. Delmont walked away towards the stables; Professor Tavernier followed him, head bent.

"We shall want very little," said the Countess, calmly, to Mademoiselle Elven. "Will you pack up what we need? And you, Monsieur Bazard, will you be good enough to go to Trois-Feuilles and hire old Brauer's carriage?"

"Madame," said I, "before I affix the government seals to the doors of your house I must ask you to conduct me to the roof of the east wing."

She bent her head in acquiescence; I followed her up the terrace into a

"Can You Stand It?" I Groaned.

stone hall where the dark Flemish pictures stared back at me and my spurred heels jingled in the silence. Up, up, and still up, winding around a Gothic spiral, then through a passage under the battlements and out across the slates, with wind and setting sun in my face and the sighing tree-tops far below.

In the north a spark of white fire began to flicker on the crest of Mount Tonnerre. It was the mirror of a heliograph flashing out across leagues of gray-green hills to the rocky pulpit of the Pigeonnier.

Instantly I drew a flag from my pouch, tied it to the point of my sabre, and stepped out along the projecting snout of a gargoyle.

I had been flagging the Pigeonnier vigorously for ten minutes without result, when suddenly a dark dot appeared on the tower beneath the semaphore, then another. My glasses brought out two officers, one with a flag; and, still watching them through the binoculars, I signaled slowly, using my free hand: "This is La Trappe. Telegraph to Morabronn that the inspector of Imperial Police requires a peloton of mounted gendarmes at once."

It may have been half a minute before I saw two officers advance to the railing of the tower and signal: "Attention, La Trappe!"

Pencil and pad on my knee, I managed to use my field-glasses and jot down the message:

"Peloton of mounted gendarmes goes to you as soon as possible. Repeat."

I repeated, then raised my glasses. Another message came by flag: "Attention, La Trappe. Uhlans reported near the village of Trois-Feuilles; have you seen them?"

Prussian Uhlans! Here in the rear of our entire army! Nonsense! And I signaled a vigorous:

"No. Have you?"

To which came the disturbing reply: "Be on your guard. We are ordered to display the semaphore at danger. Report is credited at headquarters. Repeat."

The Countess de Vassart had come up to where I was standing on the gargoyle, balanced over the gulf below. Very cautiously I began to step backward, for there was not room to turn around.

"I beg you will be careful," she said. "It is a useless risk to stand out there."

I had never known the dread of great heights which many people feel, and I laughed and stepped backward, expecting to land on the parapet behind me. But the point of my scabbard struck against the battlements, forcing me outward; I stumbled, staggered, and swayed a moment, striving desperately to recover my balance; I felt my gloved fingers slipping along the smooth face of the parapet, my knees gave way with terror; then my fingers clutched something—an arm—and I swung back, slap against the parapet, hanging to that arm with all my weight. A terrible effort and I planted my boots on the leads and looked up with sick eyes into the eyes of the Countess.

"Can you stand it?" I groaned, clutching her arm with my other hand.

"Yes—don't be afraid," she said calmly. "Draw me toward you; I cannot draw you over."

"Press your knees against the battlements," I gasped.

She bent one knee and wedged it into a niche.

"Don't be afraid; you are not hurting me," she said, with a ghastly smile.

I raised one hand and caught her shoulder, then, drawn forward, I seized the parapet in both arms, and vaulted to the slate roof.

A fog seemed to blot my eyes; I shook from hair to heel and laid my